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Childhood in Romanian literature - a beneficial delay? History playing the two faces God

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Many Western academics have expressed their views on the childhood crisis arisen in the last decades of 20th century, as a consequence of both globalization and the ideology of capitalism, as well as of the impact of media. However, for the Eastern societies these changes emerge years later. Using the representations of childhood in Romanian novels (mostly autobiographical) which have as background the socialist ages (from the '60s to the end of the '80s), I suggest that it might have been exactly this delay which made possible the conservation of a happier childhood, despite the totalitarian regime. Many Romanian writers living their childhood during communism recount this period in post-totalitarian democracy, outlining no crisis, but the opposite.

Keywords: *childhood crisis, delay, communism, autobiographical novels*

In any thematic study of literature, a synchronic approach would be incomplete without relating to the evolution of a particular theme, namely to the diachronic approach. If the initial purpose of my research was to capture the image of childhood of the second half of 20th century Romanian novels, the comparison with the Western patterns of the same period revealed that temporal synchronization is not synonymous with the synchronization of representations.

Ever since I started to research the topic of childhood for my PhD paper work in the Romanian literary field, I have noticed the difference of phase between the way Eastern and Western voices relate to the concept. While I was under the naïve impression that childhood was a „hot" point of the global cultural debates, I got quite surprised to find out that, for many Western academic views, it was almost a wasted subject. The *crisis of childhood* which was linked to the last decades of 20th century, as a consequence of both globalization and the ideology of capitalist consumer societies, as well as the impact of media, produced major changes of the image of childhood, outlined by sociologists long before we could perceive it in Eastern Europe. Thus, whilst starting in the '80s some researchers published challenging books, with apocalyptic titles and assumptions, like *The Disappearance of Childhood* (1983) by Neil Postman, *The Hurried Child: Growing Up Too Fast,*

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Too Soon (1981) by D. Elkind, *After the Death of Childhood* (2000) by David Buckingham, for the East-European societies these ideas weren't available. Clearly, the totalitarian regimes caused first a closure and a then a delay in the occurrence of the shifts produced in western countries. Considering the pejorative meaning of the term „delay", especially correlated with the semantic charge of the totalitarian regime, we could rush and make a statement. However, what I am trying to suggest is that it might have been exactly this delay which made possible the conservation of a happier childhood, in spite of the atrocities of communism.

As the literary corpus shows, many Romanian writers living their childhood in communism recount this period in post-totalitarian democracy, outlining no crisis, but the opposite! Could we than consider that the delay was a beneficial one strictly in this context? What do those memory and fiction books inspired by these types of childhood show? Very little access to television or no TV at all, a lot of time spent outside with friends, no danger of screen addiction, a more natural way to play, a closer relation with nature and family, a better appreciation of any good provided and sometimes even an affinity for books, the enjoyment of school, mostly the typical joy and fun of the period. Isn't this the childhood image so much regretted by the apologists of the „crisis"? I am not trying to deny the powerful concept[2] that generated so many studies. My intention is to note that, in this specific context, the childhood crisis emerged much later, and it was exactly the negative politic and economic system that favoured „the longer survival" of the idealised and romantic construct of childhood. As we approach the present and analyse the types of childhood in the Romanian novels that have as a background the '2000s, it is obvious that childhood begins to struggle and it has the same issues suggested by the Western thinkers about 20 years ago. However, I do not intend to emphasize this side in my paper, but rather to focus on the way that the books about communist lived childhoods become the rescuers of an image that today is no longer possible.

In the following section of this paper I will try to outline the ideas above by referring to a few Romanian autobiographical and fictional novels written after 1990 and even after 2000 in which authors (re)create the childhood universe belonging to the Socialist Republic.

At first sight, reading these books, I have noticed that most of them picture a happy childhood. The historical drama caused by the oppressive regime is actually missing or it is very little depicted. Sometimes, the attitude towards the political system is a humorous one. It seems that those children learnt how to cheat the political context, maintaining themselves happy. There was no tragedy in having no access to goods; in fact, they very much appreciated when they got exotic fruits or sweets. They became more creative, they improvised more. In a way, these novels prove the common saying that what you do not know cannot tempt you. The lack of food and electricity, the cold, the fear to express oneself in public specific to the last

[2] I refer to the concept of *Crisis of the Childhood*

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years of communism are usually completely absent from these stories or, if present, allusions are mild and there is no outrage or explicit attack. Nonetheless, what do they remember/ reinvent? A plain childhood which is no longer possible today, I would say. This is why I think these books could be a form of cultural heritage.

The first book I would like to present is an autobiographical childhood story written by contemporary author Simona Popescu which was first released in 1997. With an original title, *Exuvii* (*Exuviae)* depicts (non-chronologically) different stages of a girl's childhood lived in the '70s of the Romanian Socialist Republic (RSR). What is remarkable in this memory based narrative is that it keeps close not to a social and political reality, but to the experience of the self, exploring the world guided by inner interests. As expected, the book highlights a kind of universal/non-historical imaginary focused on a broad archetypal concept of childhood. *Exuvii* is a novel about Childhood with its fears, loves, passions, surprises and so on. There is friendship which matters, the special relationship with language, the passion for reading, the original perception of space. Also, the inquisitive nature of childhood is revealed, as the little girl in the book tries to find answers to heavy philosophical issues like God, religion, life after death etc.

The communist lived childhood became a topic, as well, for the famous writer Mircea Cărtărescu, within a few short stories in *Nostalgia* and the novel *Orbitor (Blinding)*[3]. But despite the political background, the strong images of these books are mostly related to the childhood sense for dream and fantasy pointing out a zoomed perception of reality which is sometimes modified into a hyper-reality. The world is closely depicted, patiently analysed, originally internalised by the child and adjusted using the imagination which defines the age. Therefore, all the evocations, more or less biographic (but for sure imitating memory), turn childhood into a non-historical show, in spite of the historical clues identifiable in the text. Reading *Orbitor* or the short stories of *Nostalgia* we fall deeply into the essential childhood which is certainly one of exploring and wonderment, of magic and fantasy. That is why the children of these stories live between the real and the imaginary, feeling free to dream at this stage when invention or even hallucination are parts of the game.

Another novel I would like to discuss is *Noapte bună, copii!* (Good Night, Children!) by Radu Pavel Gheo. Released in 2010, this fiction book is inspired by the childhood lived in the '70s in the RSR, but with an interesting recursion into a timeless and elementary village Teicova, where a few friends enjoy their summer vacation at their grandparents'. The only issues here are not related in any way to communism, but to childish vanity, competition between boys, weird facts and group exploration. The restricted access to TV outlined in the novel (based on the raised price of the object and the reduced offer of TV shows) is responsible for what

[3] Both officially released after 1990.

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we can call „sacramental consumption”[4]. Watching the ten-minute animation show in the evening becomes a ritual and the goodbye expression at the end of it „Good night, children!” gains the special value of a generation tag. Also, the weekly music top listened to on the radio gives them the only chance to hear pop songs of western famous artists. That is why the top is a sort of event not to be missed. Their enthusiasm is probably generated by the rarity of this kind of broadcast. In a similar way, the teenage boy character in Ovidiu Verdeș's novel, *Muzici și faze* (Songs and Tricks, 2000), appreciates the famous rock hits and bands which penetrated our culture in the '70s (Deep Purple, Pink Floyd, The Doors etc.). He usually makes magnetic-tape copies of the original tapes of some lucky friends and listens to them on his magnetophon. To grab an original tape or to buy a brand new tape-recorder was a real celebration for Tinuț, the main character.

Thus, I believe that partly responsible for saving an attitude outside of boredom and unhappiness was paradoxically the lack or the difficulty to provide these „products”/ goods/ objects. The child of the crisis described in the studies mentioned at the beginning of the article has a profile defined by boredom and dissatisfaction, despite the material and cultural abundance he has access to. But these novels prove that the happiness of a child is not directly proportional to the quantity of goods he/ she owns; on the contrary: if the access is more limited, the product is harder to get and the effort is bigger, the satisfaction and the happiness will be higher. With this statement we leave the literature field and step into the psychology and sociology areas. Fortunately, this fits very well with the novels we analysed.

Coming back to the way the childhood imagery protects itself from the aggressive contagions of history, we can notice that this is possible as a result of a certain incapacity of children to perceive the real context. Thus, it is totally believable for a writer who experienced his childhood in communist Romania to keep in memory the facts and things meaningful for him at that age, as the image of his beloved-ones, of the play, friends and school, as well as spare time memories, discoveries and other childish tricks. The other perspectives, let us call them context-related, were, in my opinion, mostly mediated by parents and other sources, so they were not first-hand experiences and they went over their emotional and intellectual level. That is why they are not included in the main line of the later literary discourse. However, every now and then, I could identify in these novels two voices: the child's (who accumulates sweet memories as images of the nonhistorical happiness) voice, and the adult's (who reflects and is able to comment upon historical and political facts from his past) retroactive one. I have noticed this

[4] I borrowed this concept from Peter Berger. In his essay, *Many Globalizations* (2002), he analyses the way consumption releases people's feeling that they are taking part to the Global Modernity and so the consumption gains a symbolic value.

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mechanism in the book of the Florian brothers, *Băiuțeii*[5] (2011). The short novel inspired by their real childhood (lived in the Bucharest of the ’70s) brings to the reader a world of childhood miracles, coming along with football games and other small delights (the smell of toast, the apple pie made by their mother etc.). But the two storytellers double their evocations by ironic notes addressed to the regime, which are not originated in the childhood perception. The sarcasm regarding the fervent tovarășa[6] /Mrs. Stănescu or the way they trivialize the concept of „patrie”[7] along with the mocking of the party’s ideological aspects obviously belong to the adults’ voices.

On the other hand, it is not accurate to induce the misconception that all children in these novels are always happy. Leontina, the little girl in *Pupa Russa* (Russian Doll) by Gheorghe Crăciun, 2003, is a half sad character. She tries to trick her unhappiness and partly manages. Being a child of the ’60s, Leontina feels the regime abuses deeply, but somehow she is able to protect herself by hiding into her inside world dominated by sensations and language revelations.

It seems acceptable that, as society changed under the impact of important factors (capitalism, globalization, consumption, the progress of technology and the power of mass-media), childhood changed as well in terms of sensibility, perception and representations. But, the fact that in our area (physically and spiritually) all these changes arrived later represented an advantage. This delay made possible to keep longer a naïve and enthusiastic attitude of the child, postponing the so-called crisis and allowing him a more gentle growing-up, perpetuating childhood, as we saw in the books selected for this paper. At the same time, there are Romanian novels with a post-totalitarian background which show us that, no matter how significant the crisis is, there are always some ways to re-connect to Childhood, to rediscover its lost spirit. The characters are racing through the challenges of the postmodern world, managing to set foot on the small island of comfort where the images of happiness survive.

In the worst-case scenario, the childhood affected by the invoked crisis will still have access to all the literature that keeps unaltered its universe and it will be able to regain from there all the lost energy, by imaginary recreating it. Therefore, being given the sad probability that all grandparents’ gardens will be gone, there will be harder to find a natural lake to bathe in and outside social play will be totally replaced by virtual alienating games, there will still be these novels that could teach us how to live a proper childhood, offering us guidelines to do it.

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[5] The title is a pun, combining two words: băieții (the little boys) and Băiuț (which is the name of the neighborhood they lived in). The sonority of these words is very similar, and the authors mix them originally.

[6] This word refers to a teacher and was a specific ideological imposed way to address to teachers at the time, as a part of the artificial communist rhetoric.

[7] Word meaning *country*, but at the same time one of the most powerful concepts of the communist propaganda.

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